

What Happened to the Dream of a "Separate Negro State" in America?

By Sean Braswell MAR 07 2016

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Why you should care

A Soviet-controlled "Negro Republic" in America was once more than just a communist pipe dream.

For at least one group, the unrest in Ferguson, Missouri, represented a promising marketing opportunity in the heart of America. "Blacks in #Ferguson, there's an alternative to this indignity: pick yourselves up with Islam, like #IS," went one ISIS supporter's [tweeted plea](#). But the Islamic State is hardly the first outside group to take advantage of racial conflict in the U.S. to boost its ranks. Starting in the 1920s, the Soviet Union made a concerted effort to turn disaffected African-Americans from the party of Lincoln to the party of Lenin — and they had a much better sales pitch than "prospective jihad."

In the late 19th and early 20th century, there was [every reason](#) for Black Americans, particularly in the Jim Crow South, to envision being citizens of another country, one either overseas or of their own creation. And, as Theodore Draper covers in *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, while Black nationalist Marcus Garvey was pushing for a permanent Black homeland in Africa during the early 1920s, a Black [Communist visionary](#) named Cyril Briggs was advancing his plan for a "colored autonomous State" in sparsely settled Western states like Nevada. American Communists like Briggs, however, were not able to "find a way to make use of the discontent which Garveyism fed on," says Draper. And so Mother Russia, in the form of the Communist International organization, or Comintern, decided to get involved.

Comintern approved a \$300,000 fund for propaganda purposes in Black America, and key African-American leaders and communist sympathizers were invited to Russia to be wooed by Lenin and other Soviet officials inside the Kremlin. One of those trained in Moscow was Lovett Fort-Whiteman, a Harlem bellman turned political activist whom *Time* magazine called "the Reddest of the Blacks." (Fort-Whiteman would die in a Siberian gulag in 1939.) Others swayed by the charismatic Lenin included the Black poet Claude McKay. "If the exploited poor whites of the South could ever transform themselves into making common cause with the persecuted and plundered Negroes," [wrote McKay](#) when he returned home, "the situation would be very similar to that of Soviet Russia today."

Plans for a 'separate Negro state' in the South were part of a strategy to produce a Soviet state in North America.

It wasn't until the 1950s, when several former African-American Communists testified before Congress and an FBI report, "The Communist Party and the Negro," was declassified, that the American public would learn the true extent of the Soviet plans for Black America, including a Soviet-controlled "Negro Republic" in the middle of the South. Those plans began in earnest in 1928, when the Comintern declared there would be "self-determination in the Black Belt" and started organizing workers and targeting Southern African-Americans with [propaganda](#) showing pictures of Lenin with captions like "LENIN Shows the South the Only Way to JOBS, LAND and FREEDOM."

And that was just the start. A 1930 resolution called for the creation of a "separate Negro state" in the South, part of a long-term strategy to foment a workers' rebellion in the northern U.S. that would combine forces with Black America in a sort of Communist pincher movement to produce a Soviet state inside North America. The Soviets were motivated "not by the desire to improve the status of the Negro in our society," according to one declassified [FBI document](#), "but to exploit legitimate Negro grievances for the furtherance of communist aims." That may have been part of it, but the American Communist Party, whose members were devoted to "fight and lead the struggle of the Negro race against exploitation and oppression," was

promoting greater Black representation in all branches of government under the banner of “equal rights” — a move that may have scared the FBI and the powers that be as much as a prospective Soviet satellite state did.

Things came to a head in 1931 when nine young Black men were sentenced to death for allegedly raping two white women in Alabama. The campaign to free the “Scottsboro Boys” provided the Communist Party with what it thought was the perfect chance to contrast racially divided America with a morally superior Soviet Union, never mind the ongoing gulags. “The Scottsboro Boys became a full-fledged, intense communist campaign,” writes Paul Kengor in *The Communist*, but one that “compounded an already tragic situation, undermining public support for a legitimate civil rights cause.”

Although the number of Black Communists in America would double to 14 percent over the next 15 years, there was a high turnover rate; by the 1950s, there were only 20,000 party members in America — 7 percent of which were African-American. A commitment to racial equality was ultimately not enough to attract Blacks into what was still considered a radical social scheme in America, and as more Blacks moved north and into the middle class, the conditions for anything resembling a “Black Belt” in the South diminished further.

By 1958, Communist Party leaders ended their campaign for Black self-determination, observing that African-Americans did not seem to possess any “common psychological make-up.” Or perhaps most had determined for themselves that communism just wasn’t for them.



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Why you should care

Because this is way scarier than an earthquake.

A giant cloud of carbon dioxide bubbled up from Lake Nyos in northwestern Cameroon near the border of [Nigeria](#) on August 21, 1986, flowing into the valley below. It stripped the air of oxygen, suffocating 1,746 villagers and 3,000 animals to death.

This may sound like a scary movie plot, but for the thousands affected, it was a very real nightmare. A hydrovolcanic eruption 400 years earlier created a crater in the lake, where massive amounts of carbon dioxide built up over the centuries. Volcanic rumblings continued miles below the surface, with gas seeping into the groundwater to create “CO2-charged soda springs” that bled into the lake, says Dr. George Kling, a biologist at the University of Michigan.

When that cap is removed, it explodes like a warm, shaken Coke.

The problem with CO2 is that it builds up, “like in a soda bottle,” Kling says. No one can see the pressure building as long as the cap — in this case, the weight of the water — stays put and forces the gas to dissolve or be submerged. But when that cap is removed, it explodes like a warm, shaken Coke, with

bubbles rising to the surface and a giant burst of CO2 escaping into the atmosphere.

Triggering the pressure's release can be as simple as heavy rain or an [earthquake](#). In Nyos, some boulders and dirt were the likely culprits, and Kling says he found evidence of a "very large and recent landslide" when he visited after the disaster. Dr. Njilah Isaac Konfor, a disaster-management and groundwater expert at the University of Yaounde in Cameroon, says there were reports of a week of rain before the event.

Luckily, there are just three known lakes worldwide with these properties, and only two of these limnic eruptions have occurred in recorded history. The first was a much smaller explosion at Lake Monoun, also in Cameroon, that killed 37. It took place two years earlier, almost to the day, just 19 miles away from Lake Nyos. Volcanologists and engineers, Kling says, have been working to eliminate the CO2 risk there ever since via six-inch pipes that pump out the gas.

While "unlikely," according to Dr. Greg Tanyileke of the Cameroonian Institute for Geological and Mining Research and the chief government scientist working on the lake, Lake Nyos could suffer another deadly eruption. Warding off such a calamity is an ongoing process, he says. Kling adds that, despite efforts to warn locals and help them make "informed choices," many have returned to their homes and farmland because the soil there is so fertile, and farming is critical to their rural existence.

But CO2 isn't the only problem. There's also a rickety natural dam made of volcanic ash and rock at one part of the crater. If it collapses, the top 130 feet of the lake could come crashing down, causing a flood that "would reach Nigeria" and endanger 5,000 people, Kling says. Even worse, this could cause another imbalance in the lake and possibly unleash any remaining carbon dioxide still suppressed at the bottom. This "double-whammy threat," as Kling calls it, is being addressed by an expensive but essential dam-strengthening project that is nearing completion.

Even if Cameroon's lakes are no longer a threat, scientists have their eyes on a far bigger lake in Central Africa with similar attributes. Lake Kivu, which lies on the border between the Democratic Republic of the Congo and [Rwanda](#), is 1,600 times larger than Nyos and contains 1,000 times more gas. It also sits on the Albertine Rift, where it is enduring increasing volcanic activity. This, combined with the fact that it has gas levels high enough to kill two million people along its shores if there's a limnic eruption, makes it what Kling calls the "largest ticking time bomb in the world."

And scientists haven't settled on what can be done to avert the danger. The lake is so big that the methods used to degas Cameroon's bodies of water simply won't work. Instead, the Rwandan government is trying to prevent a disaster and capitalize on the natural gas — the fifth largest methane deposit in the world — by carefully harvesting the deposits for electricity. But until this project is done on a larger scale, another disaster like the one at Nyos remains possible.